

Book Review for 02/16/03 by David Coffee

Title: "Power Plays: Shakespeare's Lessons in Leadership and Management"

Authors: John O. Whitney and Tina Packer

Copyright: 2000

Publisher: Simon and Schuster

ISBN: 0-684-86887-3

Price: \$26.00

Length: 316 pages

Reading time: 9 - 12 hours

Reading rating: 2 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 2 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Reading style: Several short sessions

Subject areas: Management, leadership, Shakespeare

Can we learn management and leadership skills from Shakespeare?

John O. Whitney, a noted professor at Columbia Business School, has teamed with Tina Packer, who has probably directed more Shakespeare plays than any other women in the world, to bring Shakespeare into the study of management and leadership. As a CEO Whitney has experience turning around troubled companies, having left his position as associate dean at Harvard Business School in 1972 to turn around Pathmark, one of the Nation's biggest supermarket chains. He teaches a course called "In Search of the Perfect Prince" on Shakespeare and leadership at Columbia Business School.

Shakespeare wrote one hundred fifty four sonnets, several long poems, and thirty-nine plays. Not being a Shakespeare scholar, I have, like most of us pondered over lines from a few of his most popular works in long ago high school and college English classes. There is, if we take the word of our English teachers and professors, hardly a topic under the sun that he did not explore brilliantly. Good and evil, love and hate, justice and mercy, pride and humility, guilt and innocence, war and peace. But, Whitney asserts, the one subject he returns to again and again is leadership. Successful CEOs are great leaders, and "William Shakespeare probed more deeply into problems of leadership than anyone before him and most who came after."

If we think about it, the connection of Shakespeare and leadership makes sense. Shakespeare is our language's greatest writer. He is arguably the Western tradition's greatest thinker and student of human psychology. Many think his plays "remain the outward limit of human achievement."

Whitney tells us that if we, as business managers, look into Shakespeare's mirror, we will see ourselves. "If you read his plays carefully, the power of his language, his characters, and the situations he puts them in are bound to make you stop and wonder: What would I have done? Shakespeare has something to say to everyone, but Tina Packer and I

genuinely believe he can be especially helpful to modern business leaders at every level of the game."

The book is organized around three major themes in Shakespeare's plays that resonate clearly in today's business world. Part I deals with power, what Shakespeare has to teach us about how a leader can use power well. Part II looks at the crucial business skills of effective communication and persuasion. Part III deals with values and how to reconcile what we believe as moral agents with what we do as leaders.

The book becomes a curious blend of profound insight into Shakespeare and eminently practical examples from the business world. Complex? Yes. Effective? It depends. Recommended reading? Not as an easy way to gain insight into management and leadership. Alternatively, if you are looking for something very different and very thought provoking, pick up a copy. You will again ponder the meaning of some of the greatest writing in the English language. You may or may not learn something about management and leadership. Either way, reading this book is time well spent.

David Coffee is an associate professor of accounting in the Western Carolina University College of Business. His area is financial accounting and he is an avid motorcyclist and kayaker.